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Fiber Reinvented



Thrift and
creativity lead to
Heidi Hammel's
success.

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On the Cover

This fun and flirty hat was created by Heidi Hammel of Reclaimed Creations (www.reclaimed-creations.com). She is featured in this month's "Insight Gained" on page 10.

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The mission of *THE CRAFTS REPORT* is to inform, instruct and inspire both the beginning and the established professional craftsperson and crafts retailer by providing them with: ■ how-to articles on all facets of crafts business management and related topics ■ relevant industry news, as well as information on current issues and trends ■ a forum for exchanging ideas and concerns ■ encouragement and recognition.

Fiber Reinvented

Thrift and creativity lead to Heidi Hammel's success

by Loretta Radeschi

Fiber artist Heidi Hammel of Media, Pa., reinvents, recycles, restores and resurrects. Her company, Reclaimed Creations, produces one-of-a-kind wearable art made from recycled and up-cycled wool and fabric. Her newest business, Heron Crest Studios, Inc., is housed in an early 1800s-era spinning mill.

Hammel sews hats, mittens, scarves and handbags from felted wool sweaters, woven wool garments, interior design fabric samples and men's neckties. She decorates

them with reclaimed materials, using parts of jewelry, vintage buttons, yarn, beads, lace and pom-poms. She acquires her material from interior designers, select thrift shops and donations.

"I was brought up honoring handmade objects," she states. "Thrift and creativity prompted me to learn how to sew. As a young adult I designed and stitched fine embroidery on apparel and accessories, card-wove belts, made clothes and ran a commercial slipcover and reupholstery business."

Hammel discovered the beauty of handmade wool sweaters following a family trip to Norway when she was 12 years old. Years later while coping with a chronic illness, she returned to working with fiber. "Even though I loved my job in education, I found that making things was inherently more restful and that was what my body required at that time."

After washing wool sweaters in hot water and drying them at a high temperature, Hammel began making mittens and matching hats from the felted wool. "I always made handmade gifts and found an enthusiastic audience among family and friends for my newest creations." By 2003, Hammel was selling her products at craft shows—Reclaimed Creations was born.

Of all her products, the most popular are her hats, mittens and scarves. "I made summer cotton knit hats for two years, but they





weren't as profitable as the wool ones. I didn't line them, so I had to charge less and sell more to make them cost-effective," she explains. "Also, scheduling a time to make them was problematic. I'd have to sew them in the winter when I had to do my taxes, prepare slides for jurying, make my wool products, apply to exhibitions, etc. Besides, I really like working with wool."

Special requests are her favorite creations. "One woman whose father had died a short time earlier wanted something that would combine pieces of their history. She brought me a wool suit of hers, a scarf from her dad and several

sweaters. I made a purse out of the bottom and back of her jacket, incorporating the little pockets already there. The flap came from other parts of the jacket. I lined the purse with silk and added a strap made from her dad's scarf. I edged the pockets with the fringe from the scarf."

For her own mother, Hammel made hats from the first sweater her father brought back from Norway for his wife in 1956. She also has made hats for cancer survivors. To make production easier for herself and to create an attractive display, Hammel uses several different basic patterns that she can easily vary in size and make simple, but significant, stylistic changes. When she wants to change a line to appeal to younger buyers and stay within the parameters of her

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philosophy and craft, Hammel calls upon her 20-something-year-old friends for fashion advice.

"My work reflects the twin commitments of creating beauty that serves a useful purpose in daily life and judiciously using and reusing the world's resources," she notes. Among them is a 1940s 600-pound metal lathe with which she makes pom-poms. "My husband had the lathe in the basement and we figured out a way to modify it so I could make pom-poms for my twin tassel style of hat. It cuts the production time in half, gives me much more freedom in using a variety of yarns—as many as 15 pieces—and is easy on my hands," she says. A link on her website (www.reclaimed-creations.com) to YouTube shows the process. "I especially like making pink pom-poms. There's something quirky about seeing these brightly colored pom-poms against a metal lathe from the last century."

Prior to becoming a fiber artist professionally, Hammel worked in education. First in the People's Republic of China where, following work in a factory, the University of Penn honors graduate taught English to university teachers. She then taught at her alma mater, the Rose Valley School, and at Outward Bound. She went on to become a program director of a university outdoor leadership training program, a dean of students and





founder of an Outward Bound adaptive program in a Quaker high school, and the founder of a teacher training program, the Multi-Sensory Learning Institute.

In 2007 as she was outgrowing her home studio, Hammel heard about space in a former spinning mill built in the early 1800s. "The building's owner was married to an artist and was especially understanding about my interest, and walked me through the process of obtaining and converting the space," she explains. She refurbished 4,500 square feet on the second floor into 14 studios. That year, her newest business, Heron Crest Studios, Inc., welcomed six artists. Now it is home to 15 artists in 14 studios. Among the mix of people who rent space are a fiber artist who is also an archivist at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), a photographer whose works have been purchased by the PMA, painters in all

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media, a maker of leather masks, a papermaker, a print-maker and Hammel's business partner who creates mosaics in community settings.

"I've gone from being a sole proprietor to starting an 'S' corporation and being a manager," Hammel states. "I like it a lot. I had been in my home studio for seven years and was getting lonely. I needed to rub elbows with others. You get a completely different sensibility when you ask a painter about color compared to a fiber artist," she explains. "I'm still experiencing a steep learning curve in being a businesswoman, but I'm slowly gaining the greater insight into operating Heron Crest Studio, Inc., and in promoting Reclaimed Creations.

"A physical shift takes place in my brain when I go from one activity to another," admits Hammel. She spends two days a week on administrative work for Reclaimed Creations and Heron Crest Studios, and the rest of her time on her art. "Devoting separate days to the activities makes it easier to do both. It's difficult for me, on one day, to go from production to QuickBooks or e-mail or anything on the computer," she notes.

"Once in a while I'll come across a young person who needs extra money and will hire them to take pictures, do mailing and print labels, but basically I do everything myself," she says. That has to change, she admits. "I'd like to build a relationship with the art colleges in Philadelphia and set up an internship to have a young person learn the art."

To increase retail opportunities for Reclaimed Creations, especially to a younger audience throughout the world, Hammel is opening an Etsy store. Since 2003, she's been

selling her products through regional craft shows. While Hammel has received special orders as a result of her website, she uses it primarily as a marketing tool to feature images of her work and list shows and exhibitions.

In addition to Reclaimed Creations and Heron Crest Studios, Inc., Hammel belongs to Hometown Collective, a group of artists who 20 years ago began showing their work in a member's house. "In addition to the six core members, we invite eight different artists to our annual show, now held at Providence Friends Meetinghouse in Media. Hammel is also a juried member of the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen and the Guild's Chester County chapter (see page 36 for more on Chester County). She is a registered artist with the Media Arts Council and a member of Trashy Women, a group of artists who create products from recycled materials.

"What insights have I gained? I've learned to accept and even enjoy living on a steep learning curve. When I'm satisfied with one aspect, it's time to improve another. I try to be honest with myself about what I do well and easily and what I can let other people do.

"Finding a balance between running a business and being an artist is a dynamic and constant experiment, which contains ambiguities and mysteries. If I choose to fear or hate those unknowns or challenges, I would be miserable. I'd become one of those grim artists who gripe through shows. If I choose to expect and enjoy unraveling the mysteries, then I continue to grow. I'd rather be an artist who asks thoughtful questions and gleefully shares the latest cool things I have learned." *TCR*